DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 321 068 CE 055 165

AUTHOR Marquet, Michael
TITLE Michael's Marathon: My Experience of Overcoming Illiteracy as an Adult. Literacy Lessons.
INSTITUTION International Bureau of Education, Geneva (Switzerland).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.; For other "Literacy Lessons" booklets, see CE 055 128-167. Also available in French.
AVAILABLE FROM International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Apprenticeships; Authors; Basic Skills; Dropouts; Foreign Countries; *Horticulture; *Learning Disabilities; *Literacy Education; Persistence; Personal Narratives; Scholarships; Vocational Education; Work Experience Programs; Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS International Literacy Year 1990; *New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Michael Marquet of New Zealand left school 10 years ago, not able to read or write and with a serious speech problem. He had spent 9 years in a special class and had learned very little. He had completed 2 years of high school and left at the end of the fourth form, at the age of 15 and with no qualifications. However, he had participated in a horticulture work experience program. He got a job as a laborer at the Christchurch Botanical Gardens (New Zealand). Michael joined his town's reading program that was part of International Literacy Year. His goal was to read and write an old horticulture assignment all by himself. He finished a course in horticulture for the school certificate and was turned down for an apprenticeship in horticulture by the City Council because officials thought that the program would be too difficult for someone who could not spell "horticulture" or his surname. He started working toward the National Diploma in Horticulture, which takes up to 6 years to complete. Press coverage and help from the Labourer's Union helped him get the apprenticeship for which he had first been turned down. He finished the apprenticeship with excellent marks, passed all the trade certificate exams, and was awarded a scholarship for being the most outstanding horticulture apprentice in New Zealand. Michael has written a book, called "Michael's Challenge: Overcoming Illiteracy," about what it is like to be unable to read and write or communicate with people by speech. His book won honorable mention in the Noma literacy prize contest in 1988. (CML)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED321068

LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 165

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Michael's marathon: my experience of overcoming illiteracy as an adult

by Michael Marquet

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Adkins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

UNESCO
INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

HONOURABLE MENTION IN THE NOMA LITERACY PRIZE

Mr Michael Marquet of New Zealand for the publication of a book recounting his experience of overcoming illiteracy as an adult and going on to earn a trade certificate in horticulture and gardening thereby according the reading public, especially those in New Zealand and Australia to whom his account is addressed, with insights into the problems of illiteracy and the efforts needed to combat it;

(Extract from the awards by the International Jury on Literacy Day, 1988)

SCHOOL DAYS

I left school ten years ago, not able to read or write. I had spent nine years of my schooling in a special class and in that time I had learnt very little.

Being unable to read and write was like being a tree that is dormant in the winter months. That was one of my handicaps. The other was having a severe speech problem from the age of three. While at school I did have help and attend the speech clinic. When I left school, I had help from a private speech teacher.

It is not hard for me to recall the frustrations and the feeling of being thought 'dumb' and the embarrassment when in front of people I was unable to say some words properly. I was used to having people make fun of me. It was sheer hell... I won't ever forget those past experiences.

While at school, I would often not admit to having a reading problem, I would say nothing. When I didn't understand the conversation, because I didn't understand the words, I would never ask someone to explain, I was always too scared. It took a long time for me to break that habit, it took confidence to ask.

It takes time to pick something up, therefore I was always behind in reading levels, I never did catch up. The class had too many students. The teachers did not have enough time to spend with me. Slowly, I got further and further behind.

Someone from the Education Department came home to see my parents about my school work. It was decided then to put me in a special class where they would be able to help me catch up with the other children. I never did catch up. I felt at the time that I was a failure and had been pushed to the side.

I then went to Aranui High School and completed two years there. I left school at the end of the fourth form, at the age of 15 with no qualifications. The only benefit to me in those past two years at school was the work experience programme. It was an excellent scheme. I learnt a lot of things about people and their jobs. In the first year, I worked in Noah's Hotel, the best place to get experience as a pastry cook and the best place to stay in Christchurch.

In my first year at High School, I wanted to get some experience at the Botanic Gardens, I asked my teacher if that was possible. I became the first school student to have work experience at the Botanic Gardens. I worked there on Tuesdays for six months. At the end of that time I had learnt a lot of new things about myself and decided that this was the job for me and my career for the future.

I left school, and was glad. I did not want to remember the past ten years, especially the 'slanging off' and the criticism I got from the kids for not reading and writing too well. I was also used to having people make fun of me because I spent all of my schooling in a special class for kids who are mentally retarded or backwards.

To finish the school year, I won the Clarkson prize for work experience in the special class. In the last two years I had made very good progress in the different

work places. And I had succeeded in getting a job as well. I left school a much happier person.

In the next year, I got a job as a labourer/gardener at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens. Once here, my eyes just opened up with all the plant names and new words that I had never heard of before. The botanical names just amazed me.

ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT

To pick up a pen in a public place and fill in a form is one of the most terrifying experiences for any person with a learning disability. It is a matter of skill, but also of confidence. In my early school years my parents didn't know how to help me with my learning problem. It was a very difficult and frustrating time for them. But they recognized the need to build-up my confidence in myself.

My father got me interested in running during my last years at primary school. He thought it would help my self-confidence and build a better father/son relationship. He was right. It was the first time in my life that I was competing with other people and proving to myself that I can do it just as good, if not better than the others in the field.

In 1977, at the age of 12, I ran my first marathon which was the Mt Hutt. The day came and it was bitterly cold, wet and very windy. I was the youngest competitor in New Zealand ever to complete a mara-

My ability to run, helped me a great deal in many ways throughout my life. It gave me motivation and determination that grew like a young seedling when you give it water and light.

Michael competing in the 1979 100 km run, Port Hills, Christchurch.

thon. I set a New Zealand record for the fastest 12 year old. My time was three hours thirty minutes and eleven seconds. It will be a great day to remember for a long time. In the last three miles to the finish, people lined

the roads and cheered me on. It was a great achievement and a wonderful feeling when I finished the race. My legs were very sore and tired for days but it was a day that I will never forget.

Three months later, I ran the Christchurch marathon and improved my time by twelve minutes. I won the trophy for the best performance and the fastest runner under the twenty year age group. From 1977 to 1981, I ran and completed eight full marathons, setting a number of New Zealand age records, as well as competing in several other running events. In the later years I was trained by a former Olympic coach.

There were many reasons for me to give up my running, the most important one was I wanted to have a second chance in life like everybody else to learn to read and write in this world.

MY HORTICULTURAL APPRENTICESHIP

In 1980, I got a job as a labourer at the Christchurch Botanical Gardens. At the time the Curator knew that I had a serious speech problem and I couldn't read or write very much at all. It made my life very hard and frustrating for five years.

What employer would consider giving an apprenticeship to a lad who had an I.Q. of no more than 70, who came out of a special class for slow and backward learners? And could not spell the word 'Horticulture' properly?

But, I wanted that apprenticeship in horticulture. So, one morning mum was at home listening to the radio. The programme she heard was about International Literacy Day. The local co-ordinator was talking about

I knew only too well that for the following reasons there were no paths in 1980 that could lead me toward an apprenticeship [in horticulture].
(1) I was not able to complete any job applications.
(2) Sometimes I could not spell my own name.
(3) I was not able to read and know the meaning of horticultural terms, let alone face an examination paper.

the reading scheme here in Christchurch. When I got home from work, mum told me what she had heard. I decided to get in touch with the radio station and find out how to get in touch with the reading programme. I rang the number given to me and someone arranged for Shona to come and talk to me about the programme.

I explained my background to Shona and told her I wanted to read the old horticulture assignment that I had. My goal was to read and write the test paper all by myself. Shona said 'You will have a lot of hard work ahead'. It was a real challenge for me. I then started working towards those goals with the help of my first tutor, Pat. My first goal was to get a driver's licence. It took me over six months of hard work and determination to get there. The written test was the most important bit for me.

I passed and I was so happy, I showed everybody my licence. I started to gain more confidence and I began a course in horticulture for the School Certificate. To read and do the assignments was very hard on me. There were fifteen assignments in the first year with my tutor helping me once a week. Those assignments were a very big step for me from writing my first horticulture letter two years ago.

After I finished the course in 1982, I applied for an apprenticeship through the City Council in Horticulture and was turned down. The Council's reason was that they thought that the study required would be too

hard for me. They told me I didn't have any qualifications and I could not spell the word 'Horticulture' or my surname properly. It made life very hard and very frustrating for five years and I did not have a show of getting through.

So, in 1983 I started to work towards the National Diploma in Horticulture which takes up to six years to complete. I had started with another tutor by then and we got on very well together and managed a great deal of hard work. The first years were tough going. I had eight assignments to complete and a three hour examination in November. I had applied through the Psychological Service for a reader/writer assistance in the exam.

I missed passing that exam by four marks. I felt at the time of getting that result, that it was the end of the world. But later on I thought I hadn't done too badly for my first exam. If I had given up at that time I would have been letting my tutor as well as myself down. Together we had done a lot of hard work.

Next year, I went back to the old assignments and read them over and over again. I did the exam again by myself and just managed to pass with fifty marks this time.

In 1984, I was working at Mona Vale, a large homestead with very magnificent gardens. I completed Soil Science assignments and sat the exam and passed with fifty-six marks. I was very pleased with myself, I had put many long hours into reading my assignments, practicing my writing in the evenings and weekends. My determination made me feel much stronger and I was getting a lot more confidence to achieve my goal.

Later in the year there was an article and photo of me in The Press newspaper about my achievements and the help I got to overcome my literacy problem

with the assistance of the reading schemes. A lot of people saw and read the article and the Council wondered about me doing the exam. It was still not enough for them to give me an apprenticeship that year.

So next year I went out looking for help and support to back up my story and I was so determined that I was not going to give up. I went to the Labourer's Union and explained the story to them and they said that they might be able to help. Now I was getting somewhere. It took up to four months of hard work from the union to try to change the Council minds about giving me an apprenticeship. They got very little response back and so they decided to take my case much higher through the Council to the Personnel Officer.

It was two days before Christmas when I heard about my apprenticeship. The director of Parks and Recreation came up to me at the work Christmas party and said: 'I have some very good news for you, you will be receiving a letter about your apprenticeship. You have been given one.'

I was so happy that my dream had come true after five years of frustrations and fighting for it. I was 'head over heels with excitement'.

In 1985-88, I started my apprenticeship course. During that time, I got all my 94 assignments completed with excellent marks and I passed all the examinations including the New Zealand Trade Certificate in Horticulture and Gardening with high marks.

It was not easy for me throughout those years because I had a lot of pressure building up in my mind trying to cope with the mental strain of doing so much study. I really wanted to prove to the Christchurch City Council that they had been wrong, and that I could keep up with the other apprentices or do better.

In 1988, I was awarded the P.C. Browne Scholarship, to the most outstanding horticulture apprentice in New Zealand, for one year of horticulture studies in Australia.

I hope this story will help other people who are trying to get an apprenticeship.

HORTICULTURE SCHOLARSHIP COURSE IN AUSTRALIA

In 1980, I was employed by the Christchurch City Council as a labourer/gardener at the Botanic Gardens. I had three main goals to aim for in the near future.

(1) To learn to read and write again.
(2) I wanted an apprenticeship in Horticulture and Gardening which I fought for and succeeded in getting.
(3) And, one day to be the winner of the P.C. Browne Scholarship in Australia.

I first saw the application form for the Scholarship hanging up in the information notice board in the potting shed at the gardens. Eight years ago, I would never have had a chance to get an interview or to be the winner because I just couldn't read the application form or even fill it out by myself. I didn't have any qualifications or work experience, which were required for the application form, and who would give a scholarship to a lad who had a reading level of a seven-year-old, and an I.Q. of no more than 70?

So that Tuesday, in 1980, I got a copy of the application form from the Canterbury Horticultural Society, and I took it with me to show Pat, who was my tutor at that

time. I said to Pat that evening, 'One day I am going to apply for the P.C. Browne Scholarship and I am determined to win it'. Pat didn't make any comments at all about what I had just said. So we got on with the lesson which was to read the details and conditions about the Scholarship course. At the time, I can always remember looking up the word 'Scholarship' in the Dictionary to see what it meant and how the word was broken up into syllables. But the whole exercise of reading that application form, that evening was a good learning lesson for me.

In July 1987, I applied and sent my application form away. That year was my last chance to apply because the applicants had to be under the age of 25. I was now 24 years old and a senior apprentice at the Botanic Gardens. My chance to win was just the same as anybody else. 'You have to enter to win' I thought to myself. By now I had the right qualifications and the experience which was needed. This Scholarship meant so much to me. I had waited a long time for this day to come. I just couldn't let a wonderful opportunity like this go.

Weeks went by and I still didn't hear any news about my application. I nearly gave up waiting, until one busy day, I got home from work and there was a letter from the Canterbury Horticultural Society, waiting to be opened. It said 'Your application has been accepted and next Friday afternoon, you have an interview'. Boy, I was so pleased I had got this far.

That Friday came. I felt a bit nervous that morning, mainly because, in the past, with all the interviews I had had, applying to the City Council for an apprenticeship, I had got knocked back because of my learning disabilities. But, I felt quite confident this was not going to happen again. That Friday afternoon, I was standing outside the Canterbury Horticultural Society building when the Secretary asked me to come into the board room.

I can always remember when I entered that room, the whole management committee stopped talking and they all stared at me for a moment.

The Chairman asked me to please take a seat. I felt quite strange at that time, sitting down at the far end of the executive board table. The management committee was positioned at the other end of the table. They then started to shoot the questions at me. I felt quite confident with my answers. They said to me 'The most successful candidate will be notified on Monday'.

That evening, when my family asked me how the interview went, I just said I felt pleased with my answers to the questions they asked me, and I made no more comments after that. Over the weekend, I just could not help thinking about that Friday's interview. I tried to keep mentally and physically busy, but the thoughts just kept coming back to haunt me. I got very little sleep that weekend.

This was the dream, I had waited for eight years for. I just couldn't help thinking about it, mainly because I had waited so long to apply. My heart had been set on this goal for many years. On the morning of the second Monday in September, mum wished me good luck, when I was walking out the back door, I replied 'If I hear anything, I will phone you'.

That day, I was working on the landscape crew. We had completed a big landscape project in Christchurch Metropolitan. We decided to go back to the main depot for morning tea. Five minutes later, a white car drove up into the service area of the depot. It was the Secretary of the Canterbury Horticultural Society. I started to get very nervous and I had the shakes already in my hands. I thought to myself, 'Could I be the successful candidate!!' At the time, I didn't know if any of the other apprentices from the department had applied. But I was determined not to tell a soul that I had applied for the Scholarship.

The Secretary started to walk towards me. He said 'Congratulations, you have been awarded the P.C. Browne Scholarship. This will give you 12 months of studies and work experience in the different Botanic Gardens in Victoria, Australia'. I just couldn't believe it at first, when the Secretary shook my hand. I was having my morning cup of tea when he came up to me to break the wonderful news. By now, my body was shaking all over with nerves, I was so excited and happy, so much for the cup of tea that I was holding, it just slipped out of my hand and splashed all over the ground, in front of the Secretary.

I ran to the nearest telephone and rang my parents with the wonderful news. Mum said to me,'Slow down, you sound like a roaring rugby match', she knew how happy I was that day.

In mid November, 1987, I received a letter from the Christchurch City Council. It was an invitation for my parents and myself from the mayor, Sir Hamish Hay. He had invited us to have morning tea with him and the members of the Management Committee from the Canterbury Horticultural Society. The function was held in the V.I.P. reception room in the Council Chambers. I was presented with a certificate by the Mayor for the 1988 P.C. Browne Scholarship.

Many books have been written on illiteracy but *there is not much information on students with learning problems. There was* nothing *from a student's point of view. I then decided to write a book about my own experiences.*

Two years ago, I thought about writing a book about my personal experiences. What it's like not being able to read and write or communicate with people by speech. I have spent the past eleven months working on the book which is completed. My manuscript has been published and is now available throughout the country.

Some of the chapters in my book *Michael's challenge: overcoming illiteracy* are devoted to the problems my family faced, my experiences at school and seeking help to read and write as an adult learner. I talk about the years of frustration, of fighting to establish a career in horticulture and the barriers I faced in day-to-day life. I talk about the emotional problems and what it feels like when people sling off at you, when you can't read and say even some simple words.

I have tried to write my book in the way it can help other people, e.g: school teachers, psychologists, school administrators, parents who have children with a learning disability and young people who are unemployed.

It has been a real challenge for me, putting my ideas and solutions down on paper so I can help other people like myself. One of the strongest ideas that I wanted to get across in my book was the need to always have faith in yourself and to believe in what you set out to do.

One of the many reasons I wrote my book, was to prove to others that not all people with learning problems are drop-outs.

I feel very sorry for kids like me. If society was able to change its attitudes to people with literacy problems, and got to know people as individuals, the world would be a better place to learn and live. I write because I feel I can help others who are unable to do so.

Writing the manuscript for 'Michael's challenge - overcoming illiteracy'

I feel my book has a strong, powerful message to get across to people, not only with a learning disability, but also people:

WHO LACK: *Confidence:* That makes you believe in your own ability.

WHO LACK: *Determination:* To make up your mind on an issue and stand by that decision.

AND PEOPLE

WHO LACK: *Motivation:* In striving to succeed in what you hope to achieve.

I hope this story will help many other people who are trying to overcome their learning disability.

DON'T GIVE UP!

This publication has been produced by the International Bureau of Education within the context of International Literacy Year, 1990.

The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Michael Marquet to the cause of Literacy. He is a qualified horticulturist responsible for apprentices at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, New Zealand. In 1987, he wrote a book entitled *Michael's challenge : overcoming illiteracy* for which he was awarded an Honourable Mention in the Noma Literacy Prize, 1988.

This document is available in English and French and can be freely reproduced, and translated into other languages. It would be appreciated if a copy of any publication reproducing this text in full or in part could be sent to: (1) ED/PBL, Unesco, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75700 Paris, France; and (2) IBE, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.

Readers are reminded that the opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Unesco. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Unesco Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Published in 1990 by Unesco: International Bureau of Education,
P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.